

## COVER STORY David Wilson

# Doing the legwork

In the face of gridlock and skyrocketing oil prices, buyers are paying more for 'walkability'.

**'The constant drudge of taxi-ing children to and from parks, friends and schools is something that owners are delightfully relieved of.'**

Michael McNamara,  
Herron Todd White

**M**ore planner's nightmare than "walker's paradise", Sydney feels disjointed – distended even – the embodiment of urban sprawl.

Split by the Bridge, Sydney also has the distinction of a major motorway-like artery, Parramatta Road, slicing into its heart. Worse, much of the city bustles with cars (among them many large four-wheel-drives). So, it must generally score lower than an ant's belly on "walkability" – the extent that the built environment offers convenience to pedestrians.

Lord Mayor Clover Moore says increased walkability is pivotal to Sydney's future. "There is an increasing need for walking and cycling as a real option," she says.

The goal, set out in Sustainable Sydney 2030, is to build a green city for walking and cycling that integrates the streets, parks and open spaces. Construction of the latest bike path – the Bourke Street cycleway – starts next month.

Sydney already has a sprinkling of walkable pockets. Anyone keen to find an apartment in a walkable area can tap into the wisdom of Walk Score (walkscore.com): a Google Maps-powered index that steers property hunters to walkable neighbourhoods through a ranking system.

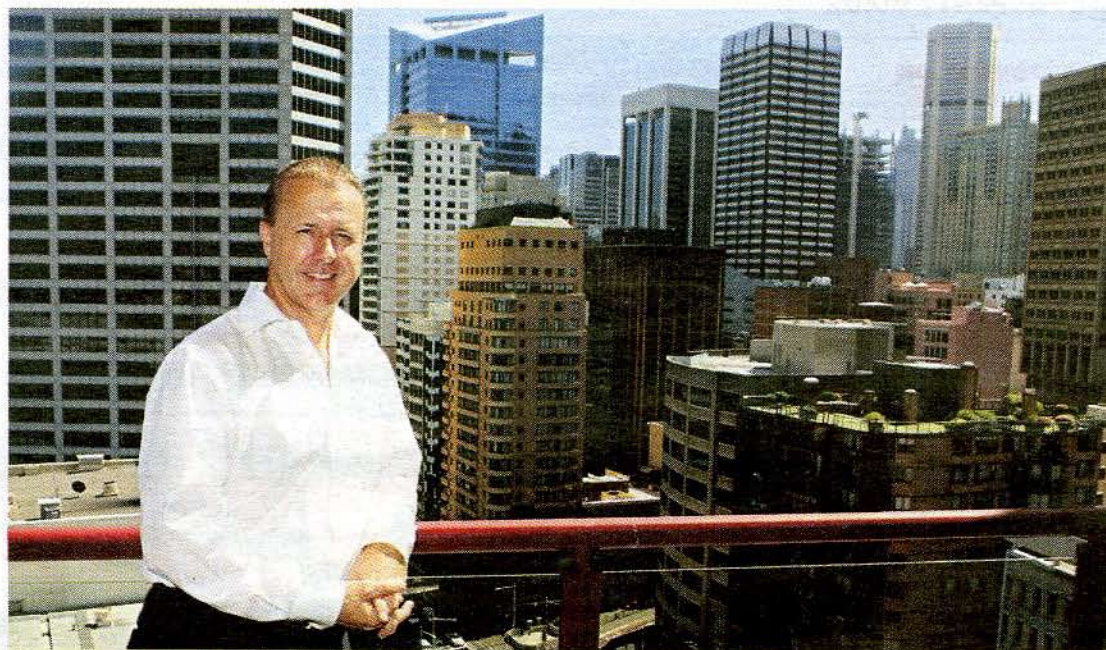
The scale goes from one (residents enlist the car for all errands and outings beyond the front gate) to 100 (walker's paradise).

Walk Score hails walkability as the key to better health, stronger communities and even tackling climate change.

The barometer has many admirers. Despite knowing the area that he covers in intimate detail, eastern suburbs-based property industry veteran David Turner would, he says, check the Walk Score rating of any unit that he was tempted to buy.

According to Turner, the IT manager at Di Jones Real Estate, knowing a suburb's walkability benefits anyone, including an overseas buyer, an out-of-towner or a local unversed in an area.

Whether a suburb be McMansion sprawl or



The high life ... Shane Dale loves being able to walk everywhere in central Sydney. Photo: Domino Postiglione

## WHY STEP OUT IN THE CITY? THE VIBE, OF COURSE

Designer and entrepreneur Shane Dale, 43, owns a sensational penthouse beside Darling Harbour. Dale bought the unit in December 2006, lured by its bargain price (undisclosed) and the lifestyle.

Dale sees several advantages to his downtown walkable location.

He gets plenty of exercise walking to and from his office, which keeps him fit, and he saves time and heaps of money by not having to commute.

Better yet, he loves the vibe of central Sydney, which he paints as a people-watcher's dream. Another plus is the opportunity to pop into a bar without having to worry about how to get home.

Dale has no time for the culture of the classic Australian suburban home squarely planted on a quarter acre. "The large backyard suburbs isolate people in a fenced prison, where TV takes precedence," he says.

Another plus of his inner-city address is being spared the hassle of tending a lawn and pool. To Dale, each of those classic des res facilities is a maintenance-heavy "time black hole" and "an albatross" – just like a car. With depreciation factored in, keeping a car, as you may feel forced to do if you live in the sticks, is an exorbitant luxury, he says.

malls and schools, its character comes through via the Walk Score algorithm – up to a point.

Despite Walk Score's oracular air, it lacks a feel for gentrification or prettiness. Its high-density housing bias raises the spectre of '70s "concrete tombstone" apartment blocks. Worse, Walk Score lacks a sense of suburbs' distance from the CBD – a failing that underlines the need for a property hunter to do legwork.

Irrespective, it must feel good to score a pad in Newtown, in the inner west, for example, knowing Walk Score, which clearly sees grunge as no obstacle, pegs it as perfect: 100 points.

## Putting a value on it

The general manager of the property valuation company Herron Todd White, Michael McNamara, hails a walkable postcode as "the ultimate in urban lifestyle". Walkable suburb

inhabitants are fitter, make a lower carbon footprint and engage with the community more, McNamara says.

The inhabitants, known as "new urbanists", must also have more money. After all, they are not busting the budget on fuel, he says.

Increasingly, he adds, parents especially place a premium on walkability.

"The constant drudge of taxi-ing children to and from parks, friends and schools is something that owners in walkable suburbs are delightfully relieved of," he says.

From a home-owner stance, another delight that walkability brings is that property values boost. Walkable suburb homes fetch a high price, according to a 2009 study by the US "urban leaders" network, CEOs for Cities.

The report assessed 94,000 real estate transactions in 15 markets. In 13 of the markets,